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Partnership Approaches to Learning: A Seven-country Study

ABSTRACT ▪ This article explores the role of trade unions in innovative learning partnerships. Formal framework partnerships suffer from implementation problems and a lack of focus on worker needs, in contrast to local learning partnerships that address the specific interests of workers displaced through restructuring. The key challenges facing unions are the types of skills addressed, coordination issues across learning partnerships and building the union skills needed to work in partnership.
KEYWORDS: employability ▪ learning partnerships ▪ neo-corporatism ▪ trade union capacity

Introduction

This article explores the role played by trade unions in partnerships for learning in response to sectoral restructuring. It draws on research conducted in the steel and metal sectors of seven countries (Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Spain and the UK) and examines a number of innovative cases of learning partnerships, exploring the challenges and implications for trade union engagement and cooperation in partnership around the learning agenda.

This is timely for a number of reasons. First, recent writing on the persistence of corporatism has viewed learning and vocational education and training as central to a 'new type of "supply-side" corporatism aimed at backing a country's competitiveness' (Traxler, 1995: 36). Second, and related to this, the pursuit of 'occupational interests', such as training and learning, has been advocated as a route for trade union innovation and renewal (Leisink, 1993). A central assumption underpinning supply-side corporatism is that learning and training are positive-sum issues which facilitate new cooperative, partnership-based approaches to employment relations, capable of delivering 'mutual gains'.

This informs the central question for our article. A wide literature has addressed the merits and effectiveness of general partnership-based approaches to employment relations modernization (Stuart and Martínez

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Lucio, 2005); but to what extent is learning a positive-sum issue around which partnership might have a better chance of success? Certainly, the development of partnership-based approaches to enhancing worker employability and advancing learning practices are espoused by EU policy-makers, but little is known about the factors and mechanisms most likely to make such learning partnerships effective and sustainable.

The countries were selected against two criteria (see Stuart, 2005, for more detail): first, variety in terms of regulatory governance of employment relations ('Rhineland', 'Latin', 'Nordic' and 'Anglo-Saxon' systems); second, active support for the research from the relevant sectoral unions in each country, providing examples of recent innovations with regard to learning, assisting case access and supplying appropriate documentary materials. In each country a team of researchers examined the drivers, functions and effectiveness of emerging learning partnerships within the context of restructuring in the steel and metal sectors.

Our key concern was to unpack the different levels at which partnerships around learning may exist and the implications for positive-sum outcomes. National legacies of industrial relations are clearly important here, influencing specific examples of *neo-corporatist learning partnerships*. Of more interest, however, is how such arrangements underpin, link to or are disconnected from alternative innovations, based around *micro-corporatist learning partnerships* and *local union learning partnerships*. In this regard, the article makes two key contributions. First, we argue that the ability to mobilize different interests with regard to learning tends to vary across the different levels of learning partnerships, and often explicit employee-centred gains are better served by micro-level partnerships. Second, we delineate the key challenges facing trade unions in terms of advancing the learning agenda in relation to corporate restructuring, consolidating learning partnerships and tackling coordination issues in relation to learning partnerships.

In the next section we consider the conceptual and contextual basis for the development of learning partnerships across Europe. Following this, we outline the nature of restructuring in steel and metalworking, and explain how this can act as an impulse for learning partnerships. Our three levels of learning partnership are then elaborated, followed by case studies of innovative partnerships. In the discussion and conclusion we consider the key challenges and opportunities facing trade unions in the development of partnership-based approaches to learning.

The Context for Learning Partnerships Involving Trade Unions

It is useful to locate learning partnerships against broader policy debates and the changing terrain of industrial relations. The EU has identified

lifelong learning and employability as priority areas within its strategies for economic growth, employment and social inclusion. This is well documented in the Commission's Communication 'Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality' (2001). The rationale is familiar: in an era of rapid change, economic uncertainty and employment insecurity, organizational success is predicated on investment in human capital, and an individual's employment and broader social status is dependent on continuous learning. Recognizing the ambitious nature of this agenda, the Commission has suggested a series of building blocks to aid the development and implementation of coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies. Of relevance here is the emphasis on *partnership working*, which reflects 'the shared benefits of, and responsibility for, lifelong learning', and can include partnerships between the social partners, local bodies and broader multi-level governmental agencies. To some extent this connects with the previous call for partnership working articulated in the Green Paper, 'Partnership for a New Organization of Work' (EC, 1997). Whilst the policy level support for more progressive forms of work organization appears to have receded (Gregory and Nilsson, 2004), the emphasis on building learning strategies through partnership-based approaches involving trade unions has not.

The emphasis on learning and employability, as central drivers of economic growth, connects explicitly with wider debates about changing national structures of industrial relations. Windolf (1989), for example, argues that new technology, economic uncertainty and changing market conditions increase pressures for decentralization: firm-level 'productivity coalitions' (or micro-corporatism) become more common as employers seek increased flexibility of labour. This has not necessarily caused a generalized decline in macro-corporatism or policy concertation (Berger and Compston, 2002; Falkner, 1997); but new social pacts involving 'supply-side corporatism' (Traxler, 1995) often focus on production and employment issues, among which training, skills and flexibility are central. Such pacts exist alongside '"micro-corporatism" at company level' (Hyman, 2005: 261). Of particular interest for this article is the mode of union engagement, based upon partnership, which is likely to underpin such arrangements, at whatever level they occur.

The partnership approach is synonymous with cooperation and joint problem-solving, in contrast to adversarial approaches to industrial relations, typically associated with collective bargaining over distributive or zero-sum issues. Instead the focus is more on 'integrative', sometimes even informal, bargaining over 'occupational interests' (Leisink, 1993), such as learning, skills development, work organization and equality issues. The 'successful implementation' of occupational interests 'depends upon the promotion of a far higher degree of consensus at the workplace based on continuous dialogue' (Gregory and Nilsson, 2004: 3). This involves certain

risks for trade unions, and critics argue that partnership gains typically favour the employer (Huzzard, 2005; Stuart and Martínez Lucio, 2005). Nonetheless, the research of Munro and Rainbird (2004) suggests that 'single-purpose' learning partnerships stand a better chance of success than more generalized partnership agreements around broader industrial relations concerns. Their UK study found that where learning partnerships were trade union-led and evolved informally, mutual gains outcomes resulted and levels of trust between unions and management were improved. However, there is little research on learning partnerships in a broader European context and we therefore know very little about the ways in which trade unions are responding in a strategic sense to the learning agenda in different countries or the specific challenges they face in advancing learning partnerships.

The nature of such partnerships will be shaped by the broader character and context of industrial relations. The national systems in those countries covered by our research have all come under intense political, economic and social pressures during the last two decades. This has had negative implications for the membership density and strength of trade unions, and has led to the weakening of both statutory labour market regulation and tripartite arrangements and an increase in decentralized bargaining. The characteristic features of most national systems, however, appear relatively resilient, though Ferner and Hyman (1998: xxiv) identify a trend whereby 'a strengthening of procedural formalization has gone hand in hand with substantive flexibility'.

More pertinent is the persistence in many European countries of a culture of social partnership. Such cultures rest upon three basic principles: a societal recognition that workers and employers have equally legitimate though divergent interests; an acceptance of the legitimacy of collective representation of those interests (including a presence in broader institutions of policy concertation); and a perception that organized accommodation may provide a basis for regulation of employment and the labour market (Berger and Compston, 2002; Ferner and Hyman, 1998). Such a culture has provided a foundation for the development of partnership-based strategies and responses within the countries investigated – for example, the Norwegian Competence Reform (Skule et al., 2002). In addition, it has also helped to shape the involvement of steel and metal trade unions within learning partnerships that have the specific objective of addressing the skills needs currently facing the steel and metal sectors.

The UK is something of an anomaly, with no established culture of social partnership, and attempts at corporatism have never developed to any significant extent. During the period of Conservative office between 1979 and 1997, state hostility to unions and anti-union legislation contributed to a process of decollectivization and a shift in the balance of power decisively in favour of employers (Howell, 2005). The abolition of

tripartite arrangements also served to marginalize trade union involvement within the fields of education and training. Even though Labour governments since 1997 have been less hostile to organized labour, and have promoted the concept of partnership within the field of industrial relations and the union role in learning, the environment for trade union involvement in partnership-based approaches to learning remains less favourable than in the other countries covered by our research.

Whilst it is impossible to understand trade union involvement in learning without an appreciation of national 'systems' of industrial relations, such structural conditions are not necessarily determinant. As Heyes (2002) observes, considerable variation can exist within national systems, and practices within specific sectors may transcend national borders. Trade unions may be able to develop and advance strategies for skill formation even within the harshest environments: indeed, Rainbird (1990) argues that union involvement is all the more salient within economies such as the UK, because of an increased dependence on workplace bargaining as a means of obtaining advances in skills training. Likewise, even in those seemingly most consensual of economies, trade unions may come into conflict with employers (or the state) over the furtherance of the learning agenda, particularly over issues such as the financing of learning investment. Of particular significance for this article are the potential tensions that can arise over how (and whose) particular interests are served by investments in learning. Trade unions will, naturally, be concerned that the benefits of learning investments for their members extend beyond their current job role, whilst employers may only support such investments if they are company-specific. These tensions are thrown into sharp relief in the context of programmes of corporate restructuring.

Restructuring as an Impulse for Learning Partnerships

The restructuring of the European steel and metal sectors has been sustained and significant in response to increasing international competition (in the steel industry, particularly from China and South Korea). European companies have changed their product market strategies, operational processes and labour capacity, and have become increasingly concentrated through mergers and takeovers, most recently by large non-European conglomerates (Stroud and Fairbrother, 2006; Stuart, 2005). There have been waves of workforce reduction across the sectors. Within the steel industry, for example, there were just 270,000 employed in 2001 compared to over 1 million in the early 1970s, and some commentators project fewer than 100,000 by 2010 (Stuart, 2005). Similar restructuring is evident across the metalworking sector. The challenges facing the sectors have had profound consequences for management strategy and working practices. Team-working has become

commonplace, new technologies have been introduced, work has become intensified and there has been an increased emphasis on non-price components such as customer service, quality control and environmental standards (Blyton and Bacon, 1997; Stroud and Fairbrother, 2006).

Such developments have had significant implications for skill requirements, and therefore for learning (Coffey et al., 2002). First, some skills gaps have emerged as large redundancy programmes have removed workers whose tasks must then be performed by those that remain. Second, and relatedly, new working practices require a more holistic knowledge of productive operations (Moinov, 1990) in addition to skills related to team-working and problem-solving (Blyton and Bacon, 1997). Organizational restructuring has resulted in increasing emphasis on 'soft' skills such as communication, whilst advances in product market strategy have increased the need for skills in areas such as customer care. Third, mass redundancies associated with downsizing have also highlighted the need for workers to gain transferable skills in order to increase their employability outside the sector. Commentators suggest that the future occupational profile will be less dependent on manual and craft skills and more reliant on 'multi-skilled workers, technicians, engineers and managers' (Stroud and Fairbrother, 2006: 466).

Restructuring has provided an impulse for learning strategies to meet projected skills needs, and also for partnership-based approaches to learning, because the social partners have an interest in addressing emergent skill needs in order to maintain business competitiveness. Other local stakeholders have had a similar incentive to embrace partnership approaches to learning as part of their regeneration strategies. Whether such pressures are actually leading to well developed, coherent and collaborative strategies of renewal through new forms of learning and new systems of skill upgrading is an empirical question. Despite the evident 'stimuli' that exist for partnerships, the key challenge – as noted above – lies in reconciling divergent interests. In general, employers put more emphasis on the acquisition of firm- or industry-specific skills geared towards improvements in business performance and competitiveness. In contrast, national governments and the trade unions have embraced a wider agenda that also encompasses the acquisition of transferable skills that enable individuals to become more employable beyond the sector. Employers have, therefore, adopted a less inclusive approach to learning.

There are, of course, subtle variations at the national level. In Germany, IG Metall is nominally committed to the promotion of lifelong learning, but this is related primarily to vocational training and continuing training. In the UK, lifelong learning has been promoted by trade unions as part of a broader strategy of union renewal. In some countries there is also evidence that employers' federations are willing to accept a broader definition of learning at national level than companies at plant level.

Different Forms of Partnership

In each country in our project, teams were charged with investigating the extent and nature of leading-edge partnership-based approaches to learning (Stuart, 2005). We are able to identify three types of approach: *neo-corporatist*, *micro-corporatist* and *local union learning partnerships*. Each has different characteristics, different goals and results in different learning outcomes, shaped and conditioned by the national industrial relations and education and training systems, as well as the more locally specific exigencies of organizational restructuring (see Table 1). For example, in terms of potential learning 'outputs', we distinguish between activities that have a dominant economic and labour market worth in terms of sectoral and firm specific skills, and learning that has a more direct perceived worth to the individual. Whilst it is often difficult to disentangle such interests precisely, we are interested in the extent to which learning partnerships promote employability in a sense that is *internal* to the sector, or *external* in the sense that it allows workers to develop skills beyond their immediate roles or even working environment.

In terms of inputs, we are interested in the mode of union engagement. Phillimore, for example, drawing heavily on Mahnkopf (1992) and Streeck (1992), argues that trade union strategies towards skill formation can be divided between a '*skill-capture*' model, where unions strive to defend the skills of specific sections of the workforce, typically in line with craft traditions, and an '*inclusive*' model, where unions develop 'strategy built around broad-based skills for all workers' (1997: 34). But how applicable are these strategies to the different types of learning partnerships being developed? It is important to note that in some cases it is difficult to distinguish precisely between the different levels of partnership, as they can often be related to and dependent upon each other.

Neo-corporatist Learning Partnerships

Neo-corporatist learning partnerships are evident in our six continental countries, but not the United Kingdom. Such partnerships are essentially *extensions* of existing arrangements that reflect the legal and institutional frameworks governing both industrial relations and education and training in these countries (Berger and Compston, 2002). They tend to involve formal bipartite or tripartite arrangements, and take two forms. The first (as in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) arises from negotiated agreements between trade union and employers' federations or individual employers at national, sectoral and/or corporate level. The second (as in Finland, Germany, Norway, Spain and Sweden) involves agreements within national education systems through tripartite representation on government committees and advisory bodies.

TABLE 1. A Typology of Learning Partnerships

Partnership type	Locus	Skills focus	Characteristics
Neo-corporatist	Sector/company	Predominantly sector- or firm-specific	Formal, top-down instruments Bipartite or tripartite Reflects existing partnership arrangements and/or legal framework Results in new legislation and/or collective agreements that promote learning
Micro-corporatist	Company/plant	Predominantly sector- or firm-specific	Formal Bipartite or multi-agency Augments existing partnership arrangements Developed in non-closure situations Results in workforce up-skilling, and sometimes in new collective agreements that remunerate learning
Local trade union	Plant or community	Predominantly transferable	Informal Multi-agency, often 'bottom-up' approaches Ad hoc, in response to closure or large-scale redundancies Results in new learning opportunities, advice and guidance for displaced workers

The latter result in new legislation, policies and national, regional and sectoral collective agreements. Their key strength lies in their codification of new procedural frameworks for the development of learning at workplace level. Examples of such national bipartite or tripartite agreements include the Swedish Competence Development Agreement, the

Spanish Third National Agreement on Continuous Training, the Finnish Study Leave Act and the Norwegian Basic Agreement and Work Environment Act. A key concern of such agreements is often the promotion of competence assessments and the accreditation of informal learning of workers at plant and sector level. Specific sectoral and company agreements tend to emphasize learning development plans, such as the metal sector agreement in Baden-Württemburg and the 1999 Employment Pact at Corus Netherlands.

Whilst these agreements are strong in the development of encompassing frameworks, they have a number of potential weaknesses. First, they are top-down instruments that are often drafted in terms of corporate interests for business performance, with a tendency to emphasize the development, assessment and recognition of in-firm skills and learning. Second, a disjuncture often exists between policy formulation and implementation; how they relate to workplace learning partnerships and union activity is therefore potentially problematic. Third, there are examples, in Germany and the Netherlands, where employers have actively sought to bypass collective agreements in relation to learning developed by such partnerships.

Micro-corporatist Learning Partnerships

Micro-corporatist learning partnerships share many of the characteristics of the neo-corporatist type, but differ in that they emerge *independently* of existing social partnership arrangements. Such partnerships are located at corporate or plant level, and are formal bipartite, or less commonly multi-agency arrangements. They develop within companies and plants where downsizing is *not* an immediate threat, and the objective is often to facilitate workforce up-skilling in order to facilitate new forms of work organization. The primary focus is typically the development of sector- and firm-specific skills.

The major strength of such partnerships is that they are flexible, and that the learning opportunities they facilitate can be tailored to meet the specific needs of particular companies and plants. They are typically corporate initiatives of a proactive nature since they are designed to anticipate and facilitate change, and perhaps most closely resemble Windolf's (1989) productivity coalitions. Hence they have a strong focus on improving business performance. Nevertheless, in some instances, the issue of external employability has been indirectly addressed by measures, such as new qualification recognition processes.

Local Trade Union Learning Partnerships

Local trade union learning partnerships differ somewhat from the two previous types. They are located at plant or community level, and are

multi-agency arrangements that involve a wide range of public, private and voluntary-sector organizations in addition to the social partners, including local authorities, educational institutions, local employment services, government departments and private training providers. They are typically ad hoc arrangements developed independently of existing social partnership arrangements in situations of plant closure or when large-scale redundancies are announced, and tend to be focused from the 'bottom up'. They are intended to provide new opportunities for displaced workers, or those under immediate threat of redundancy, to gain transferable skills in order to increase their external employability in the labour market beyond the steel and metalworking sector.

The major strength of such partnerships is that they facilitate the development of transferable, rather than sector- or firm-specific skills. They also have a more inclusive approach to learning than the previous types. Learning opportunities are focused on those in danger of marginalization within the labour market, rather than on those whose position is relatively secure.

Local trade union learning partnerships have been extremely successful both in promoting learning, and in facilitating learning opportunities for displaced workers. Such arrangements (as the cases below show) have also been successful in providing displaced workers with the transferable skills that have enabled them to return to the labour market following redundancy. The major criticism that can be levelled at such learning partnerships stems from the fact that they are reactive rather than proactive and develop primarily in crisis situations. Nonetheless, they display a degree of innovation and flexibility, in terms of meeting worker interests and general implementation, that the previous types of learning partnership often lack.

Learning Partnerships: Innovative Case Studies

In this section we examine four particularly innovative and successful learning partnerships, developed at a variety of levels: workplace, regional and community.

KACO GmbH (Germany)

This highly successful micro-corporatist learning partnership in a car components producer resulted from increased competition combined with increased pressure from customers for lower prices and higher quality. Management and the works council decided that Tayloristic work organization and the lack of automation made it impossible to reduce prices whilst maintaining quality, and the low level of workforce skills

prevented systematic changes within the labour process. For this reason they decided to link the restructuring of production with a workforce qualification process. This partnership is particularly innovative because Kaco employees were able to gain qualifications that accredited their new competences, which increased their employability by demonstrating their ability to learn.

A number of features exemplify good practice with respect to learning partnerships. First, the social partners were prepared to adopt a pragmatic approach in order to achieve their objectives. This is demonstrated by agreement that workers gaining qualifications should be re-graded to a higher wage level, even if the qualifications they obtained were not relevant for the particular job they were undertaking; and that payments in respect to teamwork would did not differentiate between individual workers in terms of performance. Second, there was a shared commitment to learning from management and works council, the employees of the company, and external agencies, including the local chamber of industry and commerce. Third, the partnership gave members of the workforce a stake within the restructuring process, through the acquisition of qualifications, flexible working arrangements that gave more control over their working day, and learning-time accounts to facilitate personal learning activities. Finally, improvements in business performance and employability are regarded as complementary goals.

Aker Verdal (Norway)

This learning partnership, a hybrid between a micro-corporatist and a local trade union learning partnership, was established following the restructuring of the Aker Verdal offshore fabrication yard. In the previous decade the company had introduced many changes in working practices, such as multi-skilling, in order to improve productivity; but in 1999 it declared 300 redundancies, agreed with the trade unions. A slack order book led to plans to make a further 400 people redundant in 2000. The company was, however, a key employer within a small Norwegian community, so these plans were communicated to the local labour market authorities and government ministers, with a request for a funding package to minimize job losses. Consequently, NOK 40 million (approximately 5 million Euros) was granted to fund a large-scale training programme, with the company providing a further NOK 50 million.

Management and the workforce discussed the redundancy process, and a 'project organization was set up to have the overall responsibility for the training programme' (Skule, 2002: 42), along with a steering group comprising a broad constituency of stakeholders (management, unions, local authorities, local colleges). The first action was to set up an on-site job centre to assist the redundant workers; the local college then

assessed their skills (using instruments designed to validate the acquisition of non-formal learning) and arranged tailor-made training courses.

As Skule notes (2002: 42), 'the content of the training courses was based on the future skills needs outlined in the strategy plan, which was based on the skills required to introduce new forms of work organization'. This included training for multi-skilling, ICT and specialist skills in 'strategically important areas'. An exercise in skills planning and matching was also undertaken, with management identifying and listing their skills needs on a database whilst workers had their existing skills mapped. The training courses were typically geared towards company-specific and production-related skills, but also included provision geared towards broader labour market application. Much of the training took place at the yard itself. In total, 2569 courses were provided, amounting to approximately two months of training per employee. Employability was enhanced because many of the courses led to formally recognized competences.

Take-up was high, with 87 percent of the workforce participating during the period November 1999 to June 2001. This reflected 'a perception that training could save the company from closure [in the future]. The shop stewards were also instrumental in motivating employees' (Skule, 2002: 43). Just nine employees eventually left the company, which was able to strengthen the skills profile of its workforce against its broader strategic goals and adopt as a direct result more flexible working practices. Partly as a result of this project, the company has now attained a more competitive and secure position within the market-place.

Bildungswerk Witten/Hattingen (BWH) (Germany)

The BWH partnership was established to mitigate the social effects of the closure of the Henrichshütte steelworks, a major employer in the Ruhr region. Initially, BWH focused on maintaining the Henrichshütte training facilities, providing employment opportunities for displaced workers and developing as an independent vocational training centre with a particular focus on the SME sector. Over time, however, BWH has developed into an organization that has a major input into regional education and training policy, employment policy and regional economic development. In this respect, this learning partnership is particularly innovative, since it appears to be evolving from a local trade union learning partnership into an arrangement with some of the features of corporatist learning partnerships.

A number of factors have facilitated these developments. To begin with, BWH adopted an inclusive approach to partnership, and a large number of organizations participated, including many that are not conventional 'social partners'. BWH also actively sought integration into existing regional networks in order to influence policy, establishing an Advisory Board comprising experts from a number of different regional institutions.

The appointment of managers not associated with Henrichshütte has also been a contributory factor in the success of BWH, since this facilitated a cultural change within the organization, that now emphasizes responsibility and initiative rather than hierarchical structures.

Although the trade unions were instrumental in establishing BWH, their influence has diminished over time, and now that BWH is an independent vocational training centre, they represent one of a number of stakeholders. This raises important questions about how the unions should maintain their influence, and continue to promote their learning agenda within evolving partnership arrangements.

Steel Partnership Training (SPT) (UK)

This innovative partnership network was conceived and established in the late 1990s by the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (since 2004 known as Community), the union representing the majority of organized steel process workers in the UK. It is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the union, created to deliver opportunities for displaced workers and those under threat of redundancy to gain transferable skills that will increase their employability in the labour market beyond the steel and metal sectors.

SPT (now known as Communitas) has two particularly innovative features. First, and perhaps most remarkably, given the national context in which the organization has developed, SPT is an example of a local trade union learning partnership, and has remained so unlike the previous case. Second, it comprises a network of partnership-based approaches to learning that exist at a number of different levels. Each separate partnership is a multi-agency arrangement embracing a different set of stakeholders that reflect local circumstances and priorities. Of particular importance, all the stakeholders are committed to learning, and are prepared to act pragmatically in order to achieve their goals. Thus employers, local authorities and educational institutes have been prepared to take an auxiliary rather than a leading role within the partnerships, in recognition of the ability of the union both with respect to engaging steel and metal sector workers, and of accessing funding sources made available both by the UK government and the EU to provide learning opportunities for displaced workers.

SPT has proved very successful in tapping EU funds to assist those made, or about to be made, redundant from UK steel plants. It has set up local offices close to affected plants, staffed them with local union officials or ex-steelworkers, who have an understanding of and affinity with the interests of those affected, and built strong networks with local labour market agencies, job centres and educational institutes. It often tries to set up 'job fairs' within companies immediately following an announcement of redundancy. SPT offices provide workers with a space

to discuss future learning and employment prospects, and its staff direct workers to relevant learning opportunities, all of which are funded by the grants awarded to SPT. This strategy has proved very effective, and evaluations of early projects reported rates of return to the local labour market of between 55 and 79 percent (Stuart, 2005). There are also examples of steel workers making radical career changes following SPT support, for example becoming teachers and sports therapists (MacKenzie et al., 2006). The approach adopted by SPT is particularly sensitive to needs of older adult learners, of crucial importance since most workers leaving the sector have not been involved in learning activities since the end of full-time schooling (Fuller and Unwin, 1999), and indeed SPT has been able to engage large numbers of non-traditional learners.

Whilst SPT's main activities have focused on those workers displaced from the steel sector, it has also provided its services to a number of medium-sized companies in other industries, after being invited in to assist workers being made redundant. In addition, it has been responsible for training Advocate Workers for Learning (union learning representatives) that operate within steel companies to advise workers of learning opportunities, and has sought to develop learning agreements and micro-corporatist learning partnerships with steel employers. These activities have not proved as successful however, and SPT's main strength remains in the offices it has established in the communities around restructured steel plants. They have come to comprise an important element of the broader union's goal of community unionism.

Key Features of Innovative Learning Partnerships

These case studies reveal key features and characteristics of innovative learning partnerships. Some of these relate to how organizations operate within partnership arrangements, whilst others are concerned with how partnership-based approaches engage with the learning agenda. The effectiveness of such partnerships is shaped by the extent to which all appropriate stakeholders are involved and the extent to which benefits are delivered for all stakeholders. The delivery of mutual gains serves to maintain and legitimate learning partnerships, making it more likely that their objectives are achieved.

Two aspects of partnership working help to foster this. The first is a pragmatic approach against clear and well defined objectives, as in the KACO case where both management and unions were prepared to make concessions. The second is a shared commitment to learning, whereby the perspectives of all stakeholders are taken into account. For this reason they need to appreciate that learning designed to improve business performance, and learning with the objective of increasing employability are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In this regard, it was notable that

the most innovative learning partnership was of the local union type, which engages with the consequences of restructuring beyond the company. Learning partnerships such as SPT (UK) and BWH (Germany) proved particularly successful in facilitating learning opportunities that were both learner-centred and responsive to the particular needs of non-traditional learners, important considerations given the fact that many steel and metal workers have few qualifications and a limited experience of participating in learning beyond their formal schooling.

This raises important questions of how, and indeed whether, local trade union learning partnerships which arise in response to moments of crisis and restructuring can develop into arrangements that are more proactive, or whether this model could be adapted for implementation in non-crisis situations. It is difficult to identify any prerequisites for this, not least because many partnerships clearly do not have this objective. However, it was clear in the cases of SPT and BWH that longer-term sustainability may depend on how the partnerships develop to meet new situations. In the BWH case this took the form of a conscious political strategy, whereby the learning partnership became more proactive through involvement within the regional policy arena.

Discussion: The Challenges of Trade Union Involvement in Partnership-based Approaches to Learning

The cases and learning typologies presented in this article reveal the different levels at which trade unions are developing partnership relations with regard to learning. The resulting learning partnerships afford unions many opportunities to increase their influence on workplace change and to formulate innovations around learning that support members in the context of restructuring. However, the roles played by unions within such learning partnerships are not without their risks and challenges, and we briefly outline these below.

The Locus of Partnership

Our research suggests that existing national and sectoral learning partnerships, typically of the neo-corporatist kind, can be too rigid to respond to the rapidly changing skills needs engendered by sectoral restructuring processes. Similarly, the substantive elements within national and sectoral collective agreements negotiated through neo-corporatist learning partnerships are not always fully operationalized at local level. A challenge for trade unions is how best to promote the implementation of such agreements at workplace level. Given that local partnerships, of a micro-corporatist or local trade union type, appear to have greater

flexibility with which to address the implications of sectoral restructuring for skills and learning there is a strong argument for unions to deepen their involvement in such partnerships. The key issue facing unions is one of coordination and multi-level bargaining across the different levels of learning partnerships.

Skills for Employability

The close relationships formed between employers and unions in some learning partnerships have resulted in both parties adopting very similar definitions of, and perspectives towards, competency. More emphasis has accordingly been placed upon learning that promotes the acquisition of firm- or sector-specific skills than on activity that enables workers to gain transferable skills that will increase their broader employability. This appears to be a specific concern in relation to neo- and micro-corporatist learning partnerships, where downsizing is not an immediate issue. In such cases learning is directed predominantly at workers on the basis of relative job security, but raises the question, from the workers' perspective, of whether it has longer-term applicability should redundancy occur. The key challenge for unions is to develop new ways of promoting learning opportunities that enable workers not under immediate threat of redundancy to gain transferable skills in anticipation of future restructuring; using a concept derived from Streeck (1992) we could understand such an agenda as the pursuit of *worker-specific* 'redundant capacities'.

Informal Learning and Tacit Skills

Informal learning and tacit skills were found to be central concerns of a number of learning partnerships, which were typically looking to utilize untapped human capital primarily to boost business performance. The challenge for trade unions is how to utilize partnership-based approaches to learning in order to enable workers to utilize tacit skills developed through informal or experiential learning to increase their employability. To achieve this objective, unions need to focus on developing partnerships that encourage employers to support the formal accreditation of informal learning, not least because qualifications are used as proxy measure of skill by employers (Fuller and Unwin, 1999). This is of particular relevance where informal learning has resulted in the development of transferable skills and knowledge that are not specific to the steel and metal sector. Such accreditation would, furthermore, enable workers to demonstrate formally their ability to learn – an important transferable skill in itself. Such systems of codification are most likely to be achieved through neo-corporatist frameworks, but face the difficulties of ensuring and monitoring employer support at workplace level and encouraging workers to take advantage of such initiatives.

Engaging 'Reluctant' Learners

The inability of trade unions especially at local level to engage 'reluctant' learners is a key challenge to the effectiveness of partnership-based approaches, although the engagement of non-traditional learners is one of the key strengths of local trade union learning partnerships. How can trade unions both promote learning as a concept, and market learning activity to their members? This requires them to highlight their success in relation to engaging reluctant and non-traditional learners, with a view to continuing and expanding their involvement within partnership-based approaches to learning. Gaining employer commitment can likewise be a problem: whilst processes of restructuring often create the need for an expanded learning agenda, resulting processes of work allocation and intensification permit little space for workers to learn and a limited motivation and capacity within management to release workers. It is notable that those learning partnerships best suited to the promotion of specific worker interests in relation to learning occur beyond the workplace and thus immediate business imperatives. The balancing of differential interests and responsibilities between employers and unions is however an ongoing challenge in micro-corporatist arrangements. This was addressed in the German KACO case through learning time accounts and employee involvement over the allocation of flexible working arrangements.

Skills for Participating in Learning Partnerships and Trade Union Capacity-building

Developing and participating within partnership-based approaches to learning requires skills that some trade union representatives, especially those working at plant level, do not necessarily possess. Our research found that many trade unionists were ill prepared either to identify emergent skills needs or to develop training solutions and strategies. It is clear, therefore, that capacity issues are significant if trade unions are to equip their representatives, especially those at plant level, with the appropriate skills to make a meaningful contribution to partnership-based approaches to learning. But such capacity-building and 'skills for participation' go beyond the immediate need for effective union engagement *within* the contexts of specific learning partnerships (Huzzard, 2005). There are important linkages and connections to be made *between* the learning partnerships that exist at different levels. This raises important questions about how unions look to develop 'coordination capacities' between different levels of learning partnership, to ensure that the benefits, for example, of neo-corporatist frameworks can be advanced at ground level, potentially through micro-corporatist learning partnerships, or to mobilize linkages between firms and workplaces at community level. Issues of benchmarking of good practice

come to the fore here as do broader issues of developing multi-level bargaining frameworks. But this poses major challenges for trade unions in the context of broader shifts within national industrial relations systems.

In more conceptual terms, the research suggests that previous categorizations of union strategy in relation to skill formation, around '*inclusive*' and '*skill capture*' models may need finessing (Phillimore, 1997). Certainly, sectorally based structures of unionism in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden appear to be more conducive to the development of inclusive strategies for learning and employability, compared to the occupationally demarcated union structures in the UK that can result in inter-union conflicts over the learning agenda. Yet it is also clear that innovations in the UK such as SPT are focused on developing broad-based outcomes for worker employability, beyond immediate workplace learning needs, and the existence of learning partnerships at multiple levels in other countries, coupled with broader considerations over the need to develop wider worker-centred learning outcomes, complicates what is meant by inclusive union strategies around learning.

Conclusions

The development of learning partnerships has become common across Europe. In this article we have attempted to map the different forms of partnership and examined trade union innovations and responses to restructuring through learning strategies. At one level it could be argued that developments around learning are proceeding in line with the supply-side agenda propagated by EU policy-markers. A strong 'policy consensus' in most of the countries we have studied has led to the formation of numerous neo-corporatist learning partnerships that aim to provide national, regional and sectoral regulatory and procedural frameworks for advancing learning issues through management and union cooperation. Such partnerships are shaped by the traditions of industrial relations that exist at national level, so it is no surprise that formal and institutionalized policy exchanges around learning between the social partners were absent in the UK. Such learning partnerships play an important role in codifying the terrain that learning partnerships need to pursue for the delivery of positive-sum outcomes. However, they lack a degree of flexibility, and implementation is often uncertain, within the context of an increasing decentralization of industrial relations decision-making and the uncertainties of sectoral processes of restructuring.

As Huzzard (2005: 233) notes:

> The logic of joint-problem-solving at the core of partnership practices is generally motivated by the need to operate in a context of the increasingly turbulent environments of firms. In many sectors restructuring has

> become the norm rather than the exception forcing unions and works councils into more intense engagement with business issues. These thus assume a more prominent position on trade union agendas. Yet these changes also act as external shocks that undermine the very trust in which partnership is built.

Accordingly, trade unions are not only looking to secure the broader frameworks of neo-corporatist learning partnerships, but are increasingly being drawn into, or leading, the development of partnerships at and beyond the workplace level. Patterns of restructuring do not lead to specific types of strategies in themselves. We need to be aware therefore of the different characteristics of learning partnerships that are emerging as a response to restructuring, the flexibility they afford and the nature of learning interests being addressed. One innovation identified was the emergence of local trade union learning partnerships, typically in response to a critical moment of restructuring and downsizing. Such partnerships are more able to focus on advancing the broader learning needs of workers, rather than the more general business imperatives that underpinned learning partnerships at other levels. Ironically, one of the best examples of this type of learning partnership was within the UK, suggesting that Anglo-Saxon environments are not exempt from innovation in industrial relations.

Such innovation aside, the research nonetheless suggests that mutual gains are not self-evident outcomes of learning partnerships. How these are implemented in practice, how they evolve (in a mutually beneficial way), and how unions engage with multiple stakeholders at different levels, coordinate strategies and build capacity within and across different levels of learning partnership are key challenges for the future. The current policy agenda and the ongoing imperatives of restructuring suggest that such challenges will become increasingly central to trade union agendas across Europe.

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